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SUBJECT: OCTOBER 27 MEETING WITH BALKH GOVERNOR ATTA

Classified By: Interagency Provincial Affairs Coordinator Scott Kilner
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) SUMMARY: Balkh Governor Atta, an ardent Abdullah supporter, believes Abdullah Abdullah's presidential runoff preconditions are "completely reasonable." During an October 27 meeting with Senior Civilian Representative (SCR) Doug Climan and PRT Officers, Atta suggested that accurate first-round voting tallies would have given Abdullah more votes than Karzai; accordingly, he anticipates that a fair and free second round would yield an Abdullah victory. He implied that violence could break out if the second round process is compromised. He conceded that there are two areas in Balkh province - Chemtal and Char Bolak - that might benefit from enhanced security measures on election day. The Governor expressed confidence that he will retain regional and national political influence regardless of the outcome of the presidential election, and regardless of whether or not he remains Governor of Balkh Province. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Atta voiced support for Abdullah's list of preconditions for the second round of the presidential elections. He characterized the terms as reasonable and easy for Karzai to implement quickly. In fact, in Atta's view, Abdullah was being too much the diplomat in putting forth a "soft" list of preconditions. Arguing that "you can't prevent fraud" just by promising to do so, Atta said he had advocated stronger measures, including dismissal of the entire IEC Steering Committee - not just IEC Chairman Ludin. After all, Atta said, the IEC Steering Committee and others seeking to engineer a Karzai victory had "paralyzed democracy" and played games with ballots and with the emotions of the electorate, disappointing voters by "wasting \$310 million" on a "travesty" of an election. Given election authorities' involvement in fraud during the first round, Atta wondered how anyone could guarantee against these authorities perpetrating fraud in the second round. Warming to his theme, Atta said that he personally believes elections rules should include banning from the second round any candidate complicit in electoral fraud during the first round. However, he added that the Abdullah campaign has not asked for that.

¶3. (C) SCR reminded Atta that in an October 12 meeting Atta had disclosed his preference for a runoff (rather than a negotiated end to the first round) and asked what steps could ensure a fair and safe second round process. Atta conceded that Abdullah supporters were very pleased about the decision to move to a second round. He credited the international community for overcoming a determined effort by highly-placed Karzai supporters to deliver a first round victory to Karzai. He made clear that he believes Karzai supporters are prepared to resort to fraud in the second round, too. He highlighted several of Abdullah's preconditions as essential to militating against fraud: Ludin's removal, suspension of selected central government ministers, and insertion of

Abdullah-supporting observers into ministries suspected of fraudulent election-related activities.

¶ 14. (C) Atta asked about the aims of the U.S. and others in the international community. Were they seeking security, democracy and development for Afghanistan? Was the primary goal to ensure Karzai's re-election? SCR assured him that the U.S. seeks free and fair elections. The U.S. Government has no illusions that it is possible to establish perfect democratic institutions immediately, but it is important to work towards this goal.

Election-Day Security

¶ 15. (C) Atta expressed confidence in election-related security arrangements for Balkh, although he acknowledged that Taliban attacks are possible anywhere in Afghanistan. He initially denied the need for any heightened security presence at particular polling centers in Balkh, but when pressed, admitted that Chemtal and Char Bolak could be more vulnerable to election-day security threats.

If Karzai Wins Second Round

¶ 16. (C) Asked whether he would be willing to continue as Governor in the event Karzai wins re-election, Atta said he might, but only/only if Karzai (1) were elected "democratically" and (2) began revising his policies. Of course, he added, Karzai might not ask him to remain as Governor.

¶ 17. (C) As if to banish the thought of a Karzai victory, Atta

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then shifted to a discussion of violence. He stated his constant and firm opposition to the "culture of violence." But he then raised the possibility that some would react violently if the second-round election process turns out to be undemocratic and non-transparent. He noted that IEC Chairman Ludin "already has predicted" that Karzai will be the winner. According to Atta, the Abdullah camp believes that an accurate accounting of first-round voting totals would have shown that Abdullah out-polled Karzai, 1.75 million votes to 1.3 million. He added that Abdullah supporters are optimistic that Abdullah will receive even more votes in the second round; therefore, they expect victory. Atta claimed the Abdullah camp is not concerned about Abdullah receiving enough votes to win, but about fraud in the calculation and reporting of the results. He strongly implied that any IEC decision declaring Karzai the winner of the runoff would be suspect.

¶ 18. (C) SCR underscored the international community's commitment to fair and transparent elections. He solicited Atta's views on what more the international community could do to ensure a clean election, given that ultimately the election process would be Afghan-led. Sticking to his earlier line, Atta reiterated the need to implement Abdullah's preconditions. He urged the international community to lend its support.

Role of Regional IEC Staff

¶ 19. (C) Atta characterized the conduct in the first round of elections in his own province as "the best in the country," saying he and his colleagues were determined to avoid interfering in the democratic process (of elections). He claimed that there was first-round fraud in such "pro-Karzai" provinces as Sar-e-pol and Faryab, but that the level of fraud paled in comparison to "pro-Karzai fraud" elsewhere. He declined to tag IEC regional officials with responsibility for the voting irregularities that did occur in the North, saying he thought officials at that level of the IEC "were not in a position" to perpetrate large-scale fraud.

¶10. (C) Prompted to revisit the question of his own political future if he no longer is Balkh governor, Atta reiterated his determination to remain active politically. (See reftel.) He cast himself as a political figure with influence well beyond Balkh province, even extending to provinces in the east, such as Paktika, Logar, Parwan and Nangarhar. As a member of the political opposition, he would continue to use his influence to seek changes in government policies.

¶11. (C) Reflecting upon his relationship with Karzai, Atta said Karzai had had great affection for him. However, the two differed on both "approaches and ideas," and Karzai failed to consider implementing Atta's suggestions for reform. According to Atta, his "problem" was that he tried to address corruption in the administration and tried to talk to Karzai about the development of a "narco-Mafia" within his government - a "narco-Mafia" that he said is causing a day-by-day increase in violence and insecurity. Atta expressed concern that, barring implementation of substantial reforms, Afghanistan would again become "the land of terrorism and narco-business."

Comment

¶12. (C) Atta met SCR and PRT Officers in the evening at his "political office," rather than at the Governor's office. Dressed in traditional robes, a sport jacket and sandals, rather than one of the well-tailored Western suits he wears at the Governor's office, he was the picture of relaxation. But he displayed his usual political agility, taking positions that offer him (and/or the Abdullah campaign) maximum flexibility: If Karzai wins, Atta can attribute the victory to fraud. If a Karzai victory sparks violence, he can say "Personally, I hate violence, but I told you so." Likewise, having cast his lot with Abdullah, Atta nevertheless leaves the door open to continuing as Governor of Balkh under a Karzai-led central government. For all his cold-blooded political calculations and the ostentatious trappings of both his offices, Atta sometimes displays a self-effacing charm. But his self-confidence, his sense that he a man destined for even bigger things, usually comes to the fore. It is clear that he is not contemplating retirement from public life.

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